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DANTE: POET  
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DANTE: POET AND APOSTLE

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# DANTE: POET AND APOSTLE

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TO THE MEMORY  
OF  
MY MOTHER



## PREFACE

The three chapters of this little book are lectures delivered, in the year 1921, at Columbia University and at the University of Chicago. They are designed as an introduction to the study of the *Divine Comedy*.

A Note identifying the passages quoted may be found at the end of the book.



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## **THE YEARS OF PREPARATION**





# I

## THE YEARS OF PREPARATION

The boy Dante Alighieri grew to manhood in a city state busy with commerce and with party strife, bordered by jealous enemies. The overlordship of all Italy rested in the Emperor; but the Emperor, heedless beyond the Alps, left the peninsula to virtual anarchy. The Church was active in the maintenance both of its spiritual authority and of its temporal power. The earth, confidently the centre of the universe, acknowledged as sovereign a distant and yet ever present God.

The immediate past of Florence held the surging conflict of Guelf and Ghibelline, with the austere figure of Farinata degli Uberti towering among bloodstained partisans. Beyond Tuscan borders, in the last fifty years, the great Hohenstaufen drama had unrolled itself, from the brilliance of Frederick, Stupor Mundi, through the

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sinister charm of Manfred, to the beheading of the boy Conradin. Dominant, then as ever, in all Italian heritage, was the glamor of ancient Rome—the consciousness, keener for contrast with the current shame, of an ancestral empire controlled in order and in peace, glorious for its attainment in thought, in art, in life.

The imagination of the young Dante found its chief treasure in a triple wealth of poetry. The epics of Virgil and of Lucan brought him the lore of the great days bygone; and from the *Aeneid*, known from cover to parchment cover, he won refinement of his innate sensitiveness to poetic beauty in word and phrase. The lyric of Provence led him into the tapestried halls of chivalry, and taught him the delight of metric artifice. And the Italian lyric, scarce half a century old when Dante began to read, gave him the sense that the poetry of courtly love was no foreign thing, but a new and intimate possession of his own land and his own speech.

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One recent poem in particular made a profound impression on Dante's eager heart and mind—the *canzone* of Guido Guinizelli beginning *Al cor gentil ripara sempre amore*; for in that poem Guido adds to the general tradition two noble elements. The first is the concept that love and the gentle heart are inseparable—that the gentle heart alone can experience love, and that love exists potentially in every gentle heart. The second is the concept that the woman loved is a specially commissioned representative of divine goodness on earth, this goodness so radiating from her as to bless and to purify those among whom she moves, and, beyond others, the man who devotes himself, as lover, to her service.

Now with Guinizelli these concepts, beautiful though they are, had remained matters of elaborate poetic doctrine. But the younger poet, with intense seriousness, enacts the ideal into reality. Loving Beatrice, he feigns not, but believes as essential truth, that she is indeed a

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✓ specially commissioned representative of divine goodness on earth, that this goodness so radiates from her as to bless and to purify those among whom she moves, and that in her service he may attain, to the uttermost, such purification and such blessedness. On this belief he fashioned and controlled his love, whose true nature neither his friends nor Beatrice herself, it would seem, came ever to comprehend.

Most perfectly, he thought, did she convey the divine goodness through her salutation—the look and smile and word of greeting. The first purpose of his love was, therefore, not requital, but the receiving of that salutation. For some time he did receive it, and was well content. Then came the tragedy: an evil report of Dante was borne to Beatrice, and she thereafter, despite poems of protest and entreaty, denied him greeting. He turned from protest to unselfish praise, and in such constancy continued until his lady's death. And his thought then fol-

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lowed her into the high Heaven whither she had gone.

From time to time throughout his youth Dante composed sonnets, *canzoni*, or *ballate*, in which, assuming the whole lyric tradition, he voiced the changing mood and experience of his own love. These poems, simple and direct in purpose, are distinguished by clear truth, by keen spiritual analysis, by evidence of powerful visualization, by firm architectonic structure, and by a Virgilian sense for poetic beauty in word and phrase. Those among them which in highest measure combine these qualities in the utterance of Dante's deep and tender adoration are unsurpassed as lyric poetry.

Here is one of the poems of unselfish praise, a sonnet crystal-clear in its telling of the ministry of Beatrice, distinguished—even in English form—by its perfect gentleness:

My lady carries love within her eyes;  
All that she looks on is made pleasanter;  
Upon her path men turn to gaze at her;

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He whom she greeteth feels his heart to rise,  
And droops his troubled visage, full of sighs,  
    And of his evil heart is then aware:  
    Hate loves, and pride becomes a worshipper.  
O women, help to praise her in somewise.  
Humbleness, and the hope that hopeth well,  
    By speech of hers into the mind are brought,  
    And who beholds is blessed oftenwhiles.  
    The look she hath when she a little smiles  
    Cannot be said, nor holden in the thought;  
'Tis such a new and gracious miracle.

The *canzone Donna pietosa e di novella etate*, in which the poet tells of his fevered premonition of the death of Beatrice, reveals at once the intensity of his inner life and that visual mastery which was destined to wield at will the lights and shadows of the other world. Firmness of structure best appears in the great *canzone Donne ch'avete intelletto d'amore*, in which the first of the three central stanzas sets forth Heaven's praise of Beatrice—the imagination flashing, in the earliest of Dante's swift surveys of the universe, from Heaven to earth and Hell; the second,

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earth's praise of the soul of Beatrice; and the third, earth's praise of her beauty. Each stanza has moreover a careful inner order of its own. The *canzoni* of Petrarch move on in fluent impulse like the waters of his own Vaucluse; the *canzoni* of Dante rise chapel-like in the strength of formal design. And through the design the lyric spirit pulses free and true.

Some time after the death of Beatrice, Dante, confirmed in the belief that she had been indeed a divine representative on earth, formed the resolution that, after long study, he would write a poetic treatise on the life eternal, and that in this treatise he would give to Beatrice honor such as no poet had ever given to any woman. Meanwhile, he desired to compose a record of his love for her. He therefore selected from among his lyrics those that he valued most highly, and wrote to accompany them a commentary in Italian prose, telling the circumstances of their composition. To the series of poems thus accompanied he gave the name *Vita nuova*. The little book



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as a whole was intended to serve, by the narration of the earthly ministry of Beatrice and its effect on Dante, as an introduction to the projected treatise on the life of the other world; yet it is at the same time autobiographical and poetic in purpose, and contains much that Dante must have valued chiefly or wholly for the sake of poetry or of memory.

The *Vita nuova* is divided into three parts, clearly distinguished in the mind of Dante, although the division is not formally made in the text. The first part corresponds to the period during which Dante sought for himself the salutation; the second, to the period of unselfish praise; the third, to the period after the death of Beatrice.

The prose, unlike the poems, is deliberate, intense, mystic. It reveals, too, a fresh and advancing scholarship, seeking with greatest eagerness lore of the soul and of the stars. But the prose retains many of the poetic qualities of the verse, and is, at its best, of exceeding beauty. And the

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narrative, for all its silvery unity, is richly varied in person and in scene.

The transformation in the purpose of Dante's love is thus set forth:

There came a day when certain ladies, to whom the secret of my suffering was well known, were met together for the pleasure of gentle company. . . . And one of them addressed me by my name, saying, "To what end lovest thou this lady, seeing that thou canst not support her presence? Now tell us this thing that we may know it: for certainly the end of such a love must be worthy of knowledge." And when she had spoken these words, not she only, but all they that were with her, began to observe me, waiting for my reply. Whereupon I said thus unto them: "Ladies, the end and aim of my love was but the salutation of that lady of whom I conceive that ye are speaking; wherein alone I found that beatitude which is the goal of desire. And now that it hath pleased her to deny me this, Love, my Master, of his great goodness, hath placed all my beatitude there where my hope will not fail me." Then those ladies began to talk closely together; and as I have seen snow fall among the rain, so was their talk mingled with sighs. But after a little, that lady who had been the first to address me, addressed me again

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in these words: "We pray thee that thou wilt tell us wherein abideth this thy beatitude." And answering, I said but thus much: "In those words that do praise my lady."

With the completion of the *Vita nuova* there came to an end the period during which Dante was primarily a poet. Lyrics of great beauty he was still to write, and the long toil of the *Commedia* lay still ahead; but his poetic energy, though in itself increasing throughout his life, was from this time on subordinate to other and yet more compelling purposes.

The years before and after the turn of the century were for Dante years of storm and stress, political, moral, and intellectual.

In the tumultuous civic life of Florence he took an increasingly active part, attaining, in the year 1300, to the priorate. The problems with which he dealt were not merely local, but involved relations, intricate and impassioned, with other states. His staunch and outspoken justice aroused a fierce hostility that led at last to banishment and bitter exile.

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Morally, these years brought faithlessness to the waning vision of Beatrice, and then a deep and continuing remorse.

But throughout the decade of transition Dante was primarily a scholar. Driven by a passionate desire for knowledge, he took the whole human record to be his province, and explored its every field. The books that reached his hands were precious to him. He studied with intensity, absorbing resolutely into his own thought all the essential values in what he read.

There resulted not only his enrichment with vast stores of intellectual treasure, but the tempering of his mind to a new force and firmness. Hitherto he had thought as a poet thinks, following instinct rather than syllogism. But he becomes now the keenest of logicians, certain of his own logical construction, pitiless of logical error in others. In the earlier period, reason had been but the handmaid of beauty. Now reason is exalted as of herself divine.

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His learning by the time of his exile was as thorough as that of any man then living. He knew the Vulgate with rare completeness and intimacy, and held it in unbounded reverence. Scarcely less was his devotion to the works of Aristotle, familiar to him, in Latin form, throughout nearly their whole vast range—logic, biology, physics, politics, ethics. Aristotle was, in Dante's thought, the philosopher *par excellence*, that glorious one to whom, more than to any else, Nature had disclosed her secrets. Dante was acquainted also with the *Timaeus*, though probably not with any of the other Platonic dialogues.

Among the philosophers of Rome he knew Cicero, Seneca, and, last and dearest, Boethius; among the historians, Livy, Valerius Maximus, and Orosius; among the poets, Virgil, Ovid, Lucan, Statius, and Juvenal.

The Fathers of the Church and their great successors in the Middle Ages increased his treasure: Augustine, Isidore, Peter Damian, Hugh and Richard of

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St. Victor, Bernard, Peter Lombard; and from Dante's own century Albertus Magnus and Thomas Aquinas. For the doctrine of St. Thomas Dante felt an admiration due not to the acceptance of the Church, for that acceptance had not yet been won, but to the commanding merit of the thought itself.

His expert knowledge of astronomy came chiefly from a Latin version of the Arab al-Fargani. Much learning, of varied character, he derived from still other Latin works, classic and mediaeval.

In the vernacular tongues, Dante knew not only the verse of Provence, France, and Italy, but also many a narrative in prose, and such encyclopaedic treatises as the *Trésor* of his own fatherly friend, Brunetto Latini.

But his eager study was neither selfish nor dispersed. The very relentlessness of his logic, re-enforced by the weary suffering of his own exile and by the old resolve to treat in poetry the life of the other world, forced him to concentrate his thought on

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the fundamental human problems—the problem of life on earth in a society racked with war and wickedness, the problem of the life eternal. And his wrestling mind achieved at last a clear and unified conception of human destiny, a conception which seemed to him to offer the solution of all problems, a conception which from that time forth completely dominated his thought and his will.

Accepting as scene of the universal drama the orthodox earth, Hell, Purgatory, and Paradise, he defined the purpose of human life as being the attainment of two joys, the temporal and the eternal. The temporal joy, possible to man during his life on earth, consists in the actuation of his divinely given nobility, and is in itself twofold; for it embraces the joy of the active life and the joy of the contemplative life. The joy of the active life consists in loyal participation in the life of human society; the joy of the contemplative life consists in the contemplation of the nature of God as manifested in his

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works. The joy of the active life is attained through practice of the moral virtues: temperance, fortitude, justice. The joy of the contemplative life is attained through practice of the intellectual virtues: wisdom, intelligence, prudence. For the attainment of the temporal joy man has the guidance of philosophy—broadly conceived, as we shall see—and the government of the Emperor. The temporal joy is symbolized by the Terrestrial Paradise.

The eternal joy consists in the contemplation of God in heaven—a contemplation in no sense material. This joy is the reward of him whose soul is at the moment of death in harmony with God. Such harmony is attained through practice of the theological virtues: faith, hope, charity. For its attainment man has the guidance of revelation and the government of the Pope. The eternal joy is symbolized by the Celestial Paradise.

Between death and the attainment of the eternal joy there intervenes a finite period



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of purification, long and painful in proportion to the sinfulness of the life on earth. This state is symbolized by Purgatory.

For him whose soul at the moment of death is not in harmony with God, there wait eternal remorse and eternal deprivation of the sight divine. This state is symbolized by Hell.

Not only did Dante achieve this conception with a clarity and a firmness unsurpassed, but he deduced therefrom, with uncompromising certainty, manifold implications for individual conduct and for social organization; and he sped the keenness of his wonderful imagination throughout the life of the other world. With the intensity of the mystic, but with the distinctness of the realist, he conceived the contemplation of God as being the supreme experience of power, of knowledge, and of love. His consciousness of the horror of sin was strong in the strength of his consciousness of the eternal joy; logic and visual might combined to construct for him the agonies of an eternal Hell.

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And he had the consciousness of eternity as few men have it. Eternity to the average man is but a great, vague length of time, comparable with the length of life on earth as a long, blurred line is comparable with a line that is short and clear. Eternity to Dante is, in truth, eternity—comparable with the length of life on earth as an infinite line is comparable with a point infinitesimal.

Filled in mind and soul with this conception of the universal scheme, Dante could not hold his peace. He knew that he saw these things with a unique intensity of vision; he knew that he could express them with a unique power of utterance; he felt that a unique and divinely given responsibility rested upon him. He accepted that responsibility with all the eager force of his great will; and he thus became, and to the end of his life remained, primarily an apostle: the apostle of the temporal and of the eternal joy.



**DANTE AS APOSTLE**



## II

### DANTE AS APOSTLE

The *media* of Dante's apostleship are the great works of his maturity. The earliest of these, the *Convivio*, is an encyclopaedia, curiously mediaeval in its plan. It is divided into several books; and each book (after that which serves as preface) consists of a *canzone* followed by a long and elaborate prose commentary, which deals first with the literal content of the poem, then with its allegorical meaning. Each poem—and in consequence each book—has one main theme, and the work is thus in some measure systematic; but many an incidental reference becomes itself the text for long digression. Nearly contemporary with the *Convivio* is the *De vulgari eloquentia*, a defense and illustration of the Italian language, written in Latin prose. Each of these two works is incomplete: the *Divine Comedy* drew to itself for many

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years all the life that Dante had to give. Finally, the masterpiece achieved, Dante returned to Latin prose for his last great message: the *Monarchia*, a treatise on the world-state. Some of his later *canzoni* and some of his Latin letters, moreover, were written in furtherance of his apostolic purpose.

The *Divine Comedy*, literally considered, is the narrative of a journey through the three realms of the other world. The traveler is Dante himself. Virgil, his first guide, leads him down the terraced funnel of Hell, up through the opposite hemisphere to the shores of the island-mountain, Purgatory, and over its steep slopes to the Terrestrial Paradise. Thence, with Beatrice, he rises through the nine revolving heavens to the unmoved and non-spatial Empyrean. Amid the varied terror and beauty of the regions visited, Dante converses with many individual spirits, and from them and from his guides learns more and more of the divine plan and the divine nature. In the Empyrean he

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attains the very contemplation of the Divine Presence.

Allegorically, the narrative represents the regeneration of the individual soul, typified by Dante. Under the guidance of philosophy, typified by Virgil, the soul becomes cognizant of the true nature of sin, this process being typified by the journey through Hell. The soul is then ready to leave sin and to undertake purification by discipline, typified by the laborious ascent of Purgatory. When purity is thus regained, the soul needs as guide no longer philosophy, but revelation, here typified by Beatrice. Under the guidance of revelation the soul mounts upward until it is worthy to receive the ultimate vision.)

There is then a perfect correspondence between the framework of the *Divine Comedy* and Dante's scheme of human life. The temporal joy, as we have seen, is to be attained under the guidance of philosophy, and is symbolized by the Terrestrial Paradise: so Virgil guides Dante to Eden on



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its mount remote. The eternal joy, as we have seen, is to be attained under the guidance of revelation, and is symbolized by the Celestial Paradise: so Beatrice guides Dante upward, through the stars, into the Empyrean.

The fundamental purpose of the poem, as Dante himself states in the letter dedicatory of the *Paradise*, is this:

to remove those living in this life from a state of woe and to lead them into a state of joy—

removere viventes in hac vita de statu miserie et perducere ad statum felicitatis.

In fuller terms, his purpose is to move men so to live that, being at the moment of death in harmony with God, they may escape eternal agony and may attain eternal joy. And while the *Divine Comedy* is supreme in poetry, its wondrous poetry is subservient, in the will of Dante, to its apostolic message.

In the prose works Dante is primarily the apostle of the temporal joy; but the consciousness of the eternal joy pervades them none the less, underlies all thought,

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and finds now and again a clear, if partial, utterance. In the *Divine Comedy* Dante is primarily the apostle of the eternal joy; though he summons still, and with increasing power, to the achievement of the possibilities of life on earth.

Dante is ever conscious of the two phases of the temporal joy. The joy of the active life consists, as we have seen, in loyal participation in the life of human society—calls for a share in the world's work that shall completely realize the potential service of body, mind, and heart. But though the active life be good, the life contemplative affords, he says, the greater joy. For in contemplation man brings to its full proper use the specific human faculty of reason; and in contemplation there shines most clearly all the true light of God. "By sitting in quietness is a man made perfect in prudence and wisdom"—*sedendo et quiescendo prudentia et sapientia ipse perficitur*.

The temporal joy is to be attained, as we have seen, under the guidance of

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philosophy and under the government of the Emperor; and as apostle of the temporal joy Dante becomes, in particular, the champion of philosophy and of empire.

By philosophy Dante understands, not the single discipline to which we most often give that name, but the love of knowledge, the eager study, that is, of the whole range of recorded thought and experience. Such study is essentially human—the *Convivio* opens with the inspiring sentence of Aristotle: "All men have by nature the desire to know." And such study is necessary that man may live aright, that man may actuate indeed the God-given nobility that is his potentially.

But Dante, whose own knowledge was the fruit of so many years of effort continued and intense, was aware that for the great mass of men such effort is impossible. Even for those who are well disposed in mind and faculty there are, he says, two great impediments:

The first is the care of the family and of the state, which properly draws to itself the greater

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part of mankind so that they cannot afford leisure for contemplation. The second is the defect of the place where a person is born and brought up, which may be not only devoid of all provision for study, but remote from studious people.

He, then, Dante, stirred by the sweetness of the learning which has been granted him, gathers in essence in one single treatise, the *Convivio*, all that his long search has found in many volumes, and offers it as a general banquet to those who hunger or thirst in care or loneliness.

Only four books were finished of the fifteen that Dante planned, yet even so the philosophic store is rich and varied; for he treats, now with scholastic aridity, now with prophetic eloquence, such themes as these: the nature of philosophy, allegory, the ten heavens, the immortality of the soul, courtesy, grace, poetic form and content, the Milky Way, the revolution of the sun, the telling of time, man's place in the universe, beauty, the physiology of sight, friendship, the problem of evil,

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nobility, empire, the history of Rome, authority, the development of Greek thought, the virtues, the origin of the soul, the four ages of man.

The *Divine Comedy* itself, in one of its many aspects, is, like the *Convivio*, an encyclopaedia planned for the benefit of those who desire in essential form the knowledge necessary for their guidance in the attaining of the temporal joy. For Dante not only expounds therein the ways of God to man and the ways of man to God, but the setting, the conditions, and the argument of the whole human drama: star-journeys and star-influence, the structure of the earth, the theory of fortune, experiments physical and psychological, the origin of plants, moon-shadows, the nature of love. And the gathered wisdom of human experience is conveyed in many a narrative of deeply reasoned history.

Nor is Dante content merely to offer thus the lore he has distilled: ever and again he turns to the enthusiastic praise of her whom he calls "daughter of God,

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queen of all, most noble and beautiful philosophy," "a lady full of sweetness, adorned with dignity, marvelous in wisdom, glorious in liberty"—to the praise, that is, of the pursuit of knowledge undertaken not for amusement, nor for gain, but in the loyal fulfilment of the native human desire to know, for the attaining of the temporal joy.

Eager souls of those who have thus sought and found are met in the other world. Ulysses, precursor of the Renaissance in his ardor to know more and ever more both of the world and of man's worth and weakness, urges his comrades on with the appeal:

ye were not made to live as brutes, but to seek after virtue and knowledge—

fatti non foste a viver come bruti,  
ma per seguir virtute e cōnoscenza.      0

Aristotle is called—and the name is splendidly rich in meaning—"the Master of those who *know*." (St. Thomas Aquinas and his companions in the spirit-garlands of the Sun, recalling gladly the imperfect

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penetration of their earthly sight, rejoice in the satisfaction of all cravings of the mind. For the very light of heaven itself is light of knowledge, filled with love:

(luce intellettuale, piena d'amore.)

And as apostle of philosophy Dante proclaims the special responsibility of those who have some special gift of mental power:

It would seem that all men on whom the Higher Nature has stamped the love of truth must make it their chief concern, like as they have been enriched by the toil of those who have gone before, so themselves in like manner to toil in advance for those that shall be hereafter, that posterity may have of them whereby to be enriched.) For he who, himself imbued with public teachings, yet cares not to contribute aught to the public good, may be well assured that he has fallen far from duty; for he is not "a tree planted by the rivers of water, that bringeth forth his fruit in his season," but rather a devouring whirlpool, ever sucking in, and never pouring back what it has swallowed.)

In the *Divine Comedy* the consciousness of this same responsibility flashes in vivid

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light. For Diomed and his companions in torment are swathed perpetually in tongues of fire precisely because they misused the gift of burning utterance; and as Dante recalls the scene of the flame-lit valley he pauses in narrative solemnly to remind himself that his own speech, fraught with so great a power, must be ever under resolute control.

To the apostleship of empire Dante devotes two eloquent chapters of the *Convivio*, three of the letters, and the whole of the *Monarchia*. By empire he understands a state co-extensive with the known world and having dominion over all local states.

The principle that such a world-state was necessary for the rule of man in the attainment of the temporal joy had in Dante's mind a threefold strength. Historically, he found the nearest approach to perfect government in his glowing memory of the Roman empire, whose divine sanction, manifest in noble character and in repeated miracle, was as clear to him as the divine sanction of the Church itself.



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Ideally, he sought unity. God is one, and mankind is most godlike when it is most unified. For the government of man in the attaining of the eternal joy, he argues, there is ordained one Church, one Pope; surely then, for the temporal government of man there should be one universal state, one supreme governor.

Practically, he saw in such a state the only means for the establishment of the justice and the peace that he so craved. His public service and the thwarted wanderings of his exile taught him indelibly the shame of greed and the horror of the stricken field; but he hated warfare and extortion not so much for their own evil nature as for their shattering of that gloriously active life of ordered liberty wherein alone man might achieve his earthly purpose.

The necessity of a world-state for the prevention of war is proclaimed with resplendent clearness in the *Convivio*:

As an individual for his completeness requires the domestic companionship of the family, so a

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household for its completeness requires a neighborhood, since otherwise it would suffer many defects which would hinder the attainment of joy. And since a neighborhood cannot in all regards be self-sufficient, in order to satisfy all its wants there must needs be a city. Moreover a city, for the sake of its crafts and for self-defence, must needs have intercourse and brotherly relations with the neighboring cities, and for this reason the kingdom was instituted. Wherefore, inasmuch as the mind of man does not rest content with a limited possession of land, but always desires to acquire more land, as we perceive by experience, disagreements and wars must needs arise between kingdom and kingdom. Which things are the tribulations of cities, and through cities of neighborhoods, and through neighborhoods of families, and through families of individuals, and thus the attainment of joy is hindered. Wherefore, in order to do away with these wars and their causes, it is necessary that the whole earth, and all that is given to the race of man to possess, should be a monarchy, that is to say, a single principedom; and should have a single prince, who possessing all things, and having nothing left to desire, may keep the kings confined within the borders of their kingdoms, so that peace may reign between them; in which peace the cities may have rest; in which rest the

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neighborhoods may love each other; in which love the households may satisfy all their wants; and when these are satisfied, man may attain joy, which is the end whereunto man was born.

And as Dante felt the supreme opportunity and the supreme responsibility of the Emperor, so, too, he held a most exalted idea of all political function and responsibility. Every state, every city, is a part of the divine ordinance for the government of man in the attainment of the temporal joy. The officer of city or of state who misuses power for his own ends is guilty then, not only of personal dishonesty, but of malfeasance against the whole plan of God.

In the *Commedia* the apostleship of empire sounds in the uttermost depths of Hell, where the betrayers of the first Emperor suffer the same terrible punishment as he who betrayed Christ himself. On the mount of Purgatory it echoes in the great indictment of imperial neglect and in Mark the Lombard's exposition of the divine plan of government. In the

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*Paradise* it urges historic sanction in Justinian's survey of the course of Rome, and reaches its climax when, in the silver glow of Jupiter, a host of golden lights, the spirits of the just, group themselves in the imperial form of the eagle.

Justice and peace, the essential effects of the world-state, are essential demands of Dante's thought. The two great ideas, and the very words *giustizia* and *pace*, recur throughout the poem in passages both of doctrine and of narrative. The shuddering horror of carnage is massed in the canto of Bertran de Born; injustice in its manifold deformity fills the lower circles of the Hell.

To spirits loyal in the fulfilment of public trust Dante pays high honor, though he find them, like Pier della Vigna, in the weird grove of suicide. And in the *Paradise* itself he arrays and arraigns the faithless potentates of his own day.

There came a time in Dante's life when it seemed that his ideal was to be realized. Henry the Seventh made ready at last to

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assert the imperial rights in Italy, and to receive the crown in Rome, true centre of all empire. Dante, stirred to passionate hope, heralds his coming in a letter messianic in spirit and imagery:

Behold! now is the acceptable time wherein arise the signs of consolation and peace! For a new day gleameth, showing forth the dawn which is even now dissipating the darkness of our long calamity; and already the breezes of the east begin to blow, the lips of heaven glow red, and confirm the auspices of the nations with a caressing calm. And we, too, shall see the looked-for joy, we who have kept vigil through the long night in the desert. For peace-bringing Titan shall arise, and justice, which without the sun hath languished like the heliotrope, will revive again so soon as he shall brandish his first ray. All they who hunger and thirst shall be satisfied in his light, and they who love iniquity shall be confounded before his shining face. . . . O Italy! henceforth rejoice! though now to be pitied by the very Saracens, yet soon to be envied throughout the world, because thy bridegroom, the solace of the world and the glory of thy people, the most clement Henry, Divus and Augustus and Caesar, is hastening to the bridal. Dry thy tears and remove the marks

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of grief, O thou fairest one! for nigh at hand is he who shall release thee from the prison of the impious, and, smiting the malicious, shall destroy them with the edge of the sword, and shall give out his vineyard to other husbandmen such as shall render the fruit of justice at time of harvest.

Henry found enemies as well as friends; and to those enemies Dante writes with scathing indignation. Henry delayed in idleness; and to Henry himself Dante writes in deep-felt protest. The delay was sealed in death. Yet, Dante, even in the abyss of grief, held to his faith, and turned again to the proclamation of his imperial dream.

Dante, then, imagined his world-state in terms of empire—and in his age the vision could scarce have taken other semblance. For us, the glamor of empire is dead. Yet Dante's message, cleared of its transitory idiom, sounds again to the world that has been so slow to heed. For nations now are as closely linked as Dante's neighborhoods. And if in their intimate companionship justice and peace are to prevail,

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if man is to be set free for the actuation of his God-given nobility, we must indeed achieve a new world-state—be it League or of other form—whose authority shall rest on world-consent.

Still other causes, definitely related in his mind to the attaining of the temporal joy, found in Dante a resolute champion.

He assumes the brotherhood of man—or, to use a phrase more nearly like his own, the natural bond of friendship among all men. In the *Convivio* he calls it *la naturale amistade per la quale tutti a tutti semo amici*, “the natural friendship whereby all unto all we are friends”; in the *Divine Comedy* he calls it *lo vinco d’amor che fa natura*, “the bond of love which nature makes.” And this concept, though he does not develop it in theory, underlies his dread verdict on the fraudulent who fill the lower Hell, and gives a deeper fulness to the greeting *frate* that waits for him on Purgatorial slopes.

The love of fatherland, intensified in him by his high estimate of the function of

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the state, rings out again and again in praise or satire. The worthiness of Farinata lies in the final triumph of his patriotism over his partisanship. When the Mantuan Sordello asks Virgil who he is, and Virgil begins reply, in the usual manner, with the name of his city, the one word "Mantua" rouses the austere questioner from haughty aloofness into instant love:

"See there a soul which, stationed all alone, is looking toward us [Virgil is speaking]; it will point out the speediest way." We came to it. Oh Lombard soul, how lofty and disdainful didst thou hold thyself; and in the movement of thine eyes how grave and slow! It said not anything to us, but let us go on, only eyeing us in manner of a lion couchant. Still Virgil drew near to it, praying that it would show to us the best ascent; and it made no answer to his request, but of our country and life inquired of us. And the sweet leader began: "Mantua"—and the shade, all in itself recluse, rose toward him from the place where first it was, saying: "O Mantuan, I am Sordello of thy city." And they embraced each other.

There follows a bitter invective against the internecine strife of the Italian states,



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bitterest of all for the Florence that had cast Dante forth, whom he yet loved, to whose fair fold he ever hoped to win return.

In the prefatory book of the *Convivio* and throughout the *De vulgari eloquentia* Dante becomes the apostle of the Italian language, loved for its own strength and beauty, and conceived as a medium superior to the Latin for the conveyance, in Italy, of any general message. And in the *Comedy* he shows indeed its wonderful resource.

In passages of the same three works, he speaks as the apostle of poetry. No man had ever a higher estimate of the poetic function and responsibility; none ever more clearly recognized the necessary union, in true poetry, of the divine fire and the patient human toil; none ever so exemplified the majesty of poetic power.

But in all his apostleship of the temporal joy Dante is ever conscious of an infinitely greater joy, possible when human life has entered eternity—the joy of a commun-

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ion with God which shall be the supreme experience of power, of wisdom, and of love. And the message of this eternal joy, now quietly, as in the depths of purpose, now clearly, as explicit theme, pulsates through all his work.

The fundamental instinct of man leads him to seek the eternal joy:

The supreme desire of each thing, and the earliest implanted by Nature, is the desire of returning to its source. And since God is the source of our souls, the soul desires most of all to return to Him. And just as a pilgrim who travels by a road on which he never went before thinks that every house which he sees from afar is the inn, and on finding that it is not fixes his trust on the next, and so from house to house until he comes to the inn; so the human soul as soon as ever it enters on this new and hitherto untrodden path of life bends its gaze toward the supreme good; and therefore as soon as it beholds aught that seems to contain somewhat of goodness it believes *that* to be the supreme good it seeks. And because its knowledge is at first imperfect through inexperience and lack of instruction, small goods appear great to it, and therefore its desires are first directed to these.

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So a child desires first an apple; then as he grows, a little bird; then, growing still, fine clothes; then a horse; then a woman; then moderate wealth, then great wealth, then wealth exceeding great. And this comes to pass because in none of these things does he find that of which he is in quest, but thinks to find it farther on. Wherefore it may be seen that before our eyes the objects of desire stand one in front of another, as if they were arranged in the form of a pyramid with its point toward us; for the smallest object at first hides all the rest, and is, so to speak, the apex over the final object of desire, namely God, who is, as it were, the base of all.

And the inexperience of the soul in this its native search necessitates guidance and government:

Forth from the hand of Him who delights in it ere it exists issues the simple soul, which knows naught, save that, proceeding from a joyous Maker, it turns willingly to that which gives it joy. At first it tastes the savor of trivial good; by this it is deceived, and runs after it, if guide or bridle control not its love.

Revelation and the Church, ordained, as Dante thought, for just this guidance and this government, did not need, in Dante's

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world, such argumentative establishment in rightful primacy as he had given to philosophy and to empire.

To revelation he accords the superlative praise of embodiment in the loving beauty of Beatrice; and he strains poetic resource in the endeavor to adumbrate the successive enlargements of joyous vision that meet the ascending soul.

The one great danger to the Church lay in failure of its own ministers surely to discern and faithfully to perform its supreme spiritual function. And Dante's apostleship of the Church, turning to satire, lashes the clergy of his day for their blindness to the very light they should transmit, for wealth that had not decked the robes of Paul and Peter.

To the eternal joy itself, in final preparation and in fulfilment, and to the woe that is its dire alternative, Dante devotes the *Commedia*.

The fundamental purpose of the poem, as we have seen, is to lead mankind unto the attainment of the eternal joy. This

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purpose Dante seeks to fulfil by the portrayal of a Hell so justly terrible as to create a compelling fear of damnation; by the portrayal of a Purgatory so painful as to instil the dread of sin, yet so hopeful as to stir the sweetness of like hope; and by the portrayal of a Paradise so supremely joyous as to inspire the will to win like joy.

To the first readers of the *Comedy*, and to all of later times who have shared the Catholic conception of the three realms, the effect of the threefold portrayal must have been, and must be, powerful beyond measure in its vivid realization of the significance of an accepted creed. But the supreme message of the *Comedy* rings clear not only for those who hold to Dante's faith in its detail, but for all those, no matter how liberal their Protestantism, who in any way seek after Christian knowledge and Christian service.

The study of the *Commedia* can scarcely fail to bring a quickening of religious and moral sensitiveness. The punishments of

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the Hell are not arbitrary, but are assigned in such a way as to reveal the intimate foulness of the several sins—represent, indeed, those sins externalized. One shudders not only at the torment, but at the perversion that is its cause. Many of Dante's judgments are profoundly impressive: the despicable meanness of the morally neutral; the buffeting whirl of passion unresisted; the depersonalizing result of financial excess; the bitter fume of wrath; the fiery shroud of burning speech disloyally applied; the anguished cleavage of the schismatic; the icy-heartedness of treachery. There can be no avoidance of responsibility. No injustice, no command on another's part can extenuate the misuse of one's own free will. ✓

Sin is unutterably ugly. Dante will not allow in the abject and hideous image of his fallen Lucifer the slightest confusing trace of the nobility that had been cast away. Sin is unutterably tragic. The sight of it stirs a profound pity which, if it lack measure, may turn itself to sin. For

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the punishment of unrepented sin, hard though it be, is compelled not only by justice but by the very bond of universal welfare. Yet the essence of sin's ugliness and sin's tragedy lies not in its commission, not in its rushing consequence, but in the atrophy of power that might have been used joyously for good, in the stifling within murky night of a life that might have grown in the full sunlight of the divine love.

The Purgatorial allegory reveals the experience of the soul conscious of the shame of sin, conscious of the light that seeks to enter, and striving to eradicate the evil disposition that still remains. There is no balking of the long pain of such discipline, nor of the bitterness of full confession; but the advancing desire for justice and for truth finds satisfaction in the very bitterness and pain; and resultant hope gives sustenance. Here again are judgments no less penetrating than those of the *Inferno*. The spirits stained by financial excess are bound and motionless,

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even as on earth they had held aloof, for love of gain, from the activity in mutual service that is proper to mankind. Failure to follow with due energy after the primal good is shown to be no less a sin than the too eager pursuit of secondary goods.

And if the discipline be hard, its completion brings a wondrous sense of freedom and of peace, of readiness for all the life eternal has to give. So, in the grandeur of the poem, when there comes for any spirit the time of such relief, not only does that spirit rise to the ascent which now no obstacle impedes, but the whole great mountain of Purgatory trembles with joy from towering summit to its wave-washed shore, and the whole great fellowship of companion spirits ceases for a moment from penance to join in the mighty cry: "*Gloria in excelsis deo.*"

The *Paradise* brings revelation of the nature of life within the will of God—a life not passive, but active in its very contemplation; a life of intellectual completeness, of mutual love unhindered and



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increased, of service with a sense of infinite power; a life illumined by

the light of knowledge, filled with love; love of the true good, filled with joy; joy that transcends all sweetness—

luce intellettual, piena d'amore;  
amor di vero ben, pien di letizia;  
letizia che trascende ogni dolzore.

Herein at last to the soul racked by earth's violence comes a sense of justice infinite and sure; herein, to the soul racked with earth's dissension, a peace that passeth understanding. "In His will is our peace," Piccarda says. "It is that sea whereunto moves all that itself creates or nature makes":

E 'n la sua volontade è nostra pace:  
ell' è quel mare al qual tutto si move  
ciò ch'ella cria e che natura face.

For the soul of man, come into life amid trailing clouds of joyousness, turns ever to that which gives it joy, finds ever that the seeming joys are far from ultimate, moves ever on in restless search until it shall find peace in God, who is our home.

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Six centuries have passed. The universe itself has changed. This earth, no more the centre of its nine attendant spheres, moves but as one of an infinite throng. The sudden call of creation echoes no more; we hear instead the measured throb of a greater symphony. Many a premise of Dante's thought has failed. Yet his apostleship of the eternal joy endures, and will endure. Obsolete, indeed, are some phrases of his message, some elements of his great design; but the heart of it lives still with a vitality that transcends the years. For the heart of it is spiritual, not formal; moral, not abstract; not fabulous, but true. His Lucifer is anthropomorphous; not so his God.



**THE *DIVINE COMEDY* AS POETRY**



### III

## THE *DIVINE COMEDY* AS POETRY

The fundamental purpose of the *Divine Comedy* is to move men so to live that, being at the moment of death in harmony with God, they may escape eternal agony and may attain the joy of eternal communion with the divine power, wisdom, love.

Throughout the poem, as through a great cathedral, this purpose dominates, determinating alike plan and elevation, clustered pier and window luminant, frescoed chapel, graven pulpit, perfect shrine.

And as the gifts of art render the cathedral a more fitting place to worship God, so is the apostleship of the *Divine Comedy* the more effective for its poetry. For Dante's supreme poetic energy, poured forth in unreserved self-giving and in utter

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loyalty to the controlling vision, informs the apostolic message with supreme power.

In the fulfilment of his purpose Dante had first to conceive the ordered setting of the great drama. That setting is the entire mediaeval universe: in the midst the earth, a motionless ball, covered by a hemisphere of land and an unknown hemisphere of water; round about, the nine revolving heavens; beyond, the spaceless Empyrean.

Throughout the universe, as thus defined, the poet's imagination ranged in eager search. From the roads and rivers and hills whose individual characters he, the wanderer, so surely seized, his multiplying and surveying mind reached out to fashion those unseen; and then to grasp in a single consciousness the many-contoured mass of the known world and the uncharted seas that tossed beyond. This consciousness attained, he can reveal, in a few swift lines, the lights and shadows of the whole earth:

On Golgotha the rays of the dawn were shining; the Spanish strait lay in the depth of

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night; the waves of the Ganges burned in the noon-tide; and from the mount of Purgatory the day was dying.

So, too, he sped his thought upward to planets and to stars, well loved and known as individual friends, watched in their whole great path from the eastern mist over the zenith and down into the west. All that a student of his day could know of their intricate motion Dante rejoiced to know. He loved them for their own light and for their summoning eternity; he sought them in simile; adorned with them the mornings and the evenings of his journey; and ended each of the three *cantiche* with the same words: "the stars."

And when in his ascending course he reaches Gemini, he surveys heaven and earth alike:

With my sight I returned through all and each of the several spheres, and saw this globe such that I smiled at its mean semblance. . . . I saw the Moon enkindled without shadow. The aspect of the Sun I here endured, and I saw how Mercury and Venus move around and near him. Then appeared to me the temperateness of Jove,



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between Saturn and Mars, and then was clear to me the varying which they make in their position. And all the seven were displayed to me—how great they are and how swift they are, and how far apart they are in their abodes. While I was revolving with the eternal Twins, the little threshing-floor we grow so fierce about appeared to me, from its hills to its river-mouths.

Dante's purpose was to be achieved through the objective portrayal of the state of souls after death: he was then in particular concerned with the three realms of the other world—Hell, Purgatory, Paradise. He must therefore build three visual images. And for the satisfaction of his poetic sense these images must be essentially symmetrical, yet varied in their symmetry—each must be of the same order as the two companion images, and yet distinct in difference.

The Church taught of a Hell within the earth; suggested, though it did not assert, that Purgatory lay adjacent; and peopled the Empyrean with the spirits of the elect. In no case did the Church define the inner structure of the realm. Dante retained

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the orthodox Hell and Paradise; but in the doctrinal freedom as to Purgatory he found the chance for a noble poetic invention. For a Purgatory under the earth could scarce be other than a second and a minor Hell, quite incommensurate with the conceptions of the true Hell and of the Paradise. So for his Purgatory Dante created a great island-mountain, towering alone in the midst of the seas at the antipodes of Jerusalem. Thus in its grandeur the second realm is worthy of the other two. And thus, moreover, Purgatory, unlike the subterranean Hell and the celestial Paradise, may present the sights and sounds of earth's surface and earth's atmosphere.

But there was necessary still further difference between the first two realms; for Hell and Purgatory are both places of torment. Had the whole mountain, like the infernal pit, been ringed with pain, the effect would have been unendurable in its dread monotony. So Dante raises Purgatory itself to the higher reaches of

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the mountain, and turns the lower slopes into a varied place of waiting where there is no punishment. And the first cantos of the *Purgatorio* come to the reader with an immense relief, carrying him onward refreshed and re-enforced until he is ready to endure again the circles of suffering. Then, with a fine sense for balance and for the preservation of traditional beauty, Dante crowns his mountain with the Earthly Paradise.

Logic and poetry alike suggest that each realm be divided into different regions. So, for the punishment of different sins, Dante terraces his Hell and Purgatory. For Paradise, astronomy offered him a series of nine unpeopled spheres; theology offered an Empyrean thronged with the souls of the blest. He then, seeing his opportunity, feigns that these souls, while having their abode in the Empyrean, may descend in groups to the several inner heavens in such wise as to manifest the variation in their capacity for blessedness. Thus in its division the Paradise is

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made similar to the Purgatory and to the Hell.

As the setting of the drama comprises the whole universe, so its *personae* comprise the whole human host. Even as Dante possessed an extraordinary consciousness of universal space, so he possessed an extraordinary consciousness of the crowding sequence of life throughout the ages. He insists repeatedly upon the vast numbers of the spirits seen in one or another region. Even the first throng of the neutral is such, he says, "that I should never have believed death had undone so many."

Before this background of masses nameless and unknown, there advance into individuality scores of souls who had in life been touched with the light of fame or the brand of infamy. And in the selection of such spirits Dante sends his imagination through time as he had sent it through space. Legend and historic record alike yield human harvest; every century from the sixth before Christ to Dante's own

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fourteenth has its representatives among the persons of the *Comedy*. Again and again the ages pass in swift review; again and again some tercet, like a lightning flash, reveals a single consciousness of future, present, past.

And he surveys as well the varied lives and motives of mankind. From all that he knows of man he will draw for the completeness of his poem: from sense and thought, from emotion and will; from love of woman, love of son, and love of friend; from quest, from service, and from sloth; from crises and the life of every day; from righteousness, and from sin manifold.

In the development of the universal drama Dante, by nature and by force of will, seeks human truth, vividness, beauty, and unity: human truth, that the reader, entering into a great fellowship, may derive therefrom a refining insight and a vital concern for his own conduct and his own fate; vividness, that the reader may accept, convinced, the possibility of such experience; beauty, that the reader may

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heed the message willingly and may gain treasure for remembered store; unity, that the reader may behold the vision in its completeness.

The poem has a fundamental unity in the sense of the oneness of creation that underlies it all:

The glory of Him who moves everything penetrates through the universe, and is resplendent in one part more and in another less—

La gloria di colui che tutto move  
per l'universo penetra e risplende  
in una parte più e meno altrove.

Obvious unity is achieved through the journey that extends from the first line of the poem to the last, for Dante himself, a divinely commissioned traveler, visits the three realms to attain ultimate communion with the Divine Presence.

And the interweaving of part with part in memory is achieved by the most elaborate contrivance of pendant contrast, of anticipation, and of reminiscence, that ever went to the making of a masterpiece.

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A chief instance of what I have called pendant contrast is that between the ferrying of the damned across the Acheron and the ferrying of the redeemed from Tiber's mouth across the seas to Purgatory. Note, in the two passages, the contrasts in the general setting, in the look and gesture of the pilots, in the mood of the spirits, even in the vessels and their propulsion. First, then, the passage of the Acheron. Dante and Virgil have joined the sad throng upon the bank:

And behold! coming toward us in a boat, an old man, white with ancient hair, crying: "Woe to you, wicked souls! hope not ever to see the heavens! I come to carry you to the other bank, into the eternal darkness, into heat and into frost. And thou who art there, living soul, depart from these that are dead." But when he saw that I did not depart, he said: "By another way, by other ports thou shalt come to the shore, not here, for passage; a lighter bark must carry thee." And my leader to him: "Charon, vex not thyself; it is thus willed there where is power for that which is willed; ask then no more." Thereon were quiet the fleecy jaws of the ferryman of the livid marsh, who round about his

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eyes had wheels of flame. But those souls, who were weary and naked, changed color and gnashed their teeth, soon as they heard his cruel words. They blasphemed God and their parents, the human race, the place, the time and the seed of their sowing and of their birth. Then all of them, bitterly weeping, drew together to the evil bank which awaits every man who fears not God. Charon the demon, with eyes of glowing coal, beckoning to them, collects them all; he beats with his oar whoever lingers. As in autumn the leaves depart one after the other, until the bough sees all its spoils upon the earth, in like wise the evil seed of Adam throw themselves from that shore one by one, at signals, as the bird at his recall. Thus they go over the dusky wave, and before they have landed on the farther side, already on this a new throng is assembled.

And now the passage of the seas to Purgatory. It is Easter morning. Dante and Virgil stand on the shore of the great island-mountain:

And behold! as, at approach of dawn, Mars glows ruddy through the dense vapors, down in the west above the ocean floor, such appeared to me a light along the sea coming so swiftly that no flight equals its motion. From which when I had a little withdrawn my eye to ask my Leader,



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again I saw it, brighter become and larger. Then on each side of it appeared to me a something white, and beneath, little by little, another came forth from it. My Master still said not a word until the first white things appeared as wings; then, when he clearly recognized the pilot, he cried out: "Mind, mind thou bend thy knees: lo! the Angel of God: fold thy hands: henceforth shalt thou see such officials. See how he scorns human instruments, so that he wills not oar, nor other sail than his own wings, between such distant shores. See how he holds them straight toward heaven, stirring the air with his eternal feathers, which are not changed like mortal hair." Then, as the Bird Divine came more and more toward us, the brighter he appeared; so that my eye endured him not near by, but I bent it down; and he came on to the shore with a little vessel, swift and light, so that the water swallowed naught of it. At the stern stood the Celestial Pilot, such that he seemed inscribed among the blest; and more than a hundred spirits sat within. "In exitu Israel de Aegypto" they all were singing together with one voice, with whatso of that psalm is after written. Then he made them the sign of the Holy Cross; whereon they all threw themselves upon the strand; and he went away swift as he had come.

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Many a passage in the *Comedy*, like Charon's reference to the lighter boat, awaits fulfilment in a far later canto; and in the same way many a passage looks back to a scene visited long before. Thus the last words of Beatrice in Heaven send the thought down to the tortuous cleft of papal Simonists.

The beauty of the *Commedia* lies not only in the loveliness of its later scenes and in its delightful glimpses of the normal life of man and of nature, but in its artistry in verse and phrase.

The poem is supreme in rhythmic beauty. Dante created for it a metrical form, the *terza rima*, not only new but of such balanced grace and strength, such measured response in the rhyme, such continuity within ordered change, that it met the strenuous demands of his own purpose, and has lived on as one of the three great forms of Italian narrative and meditative verse. To Dante, at least, the *terza rima* seemed appropriate in its very three-ness; for its characteristic element is the stanza

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of three lines, and each new rhyme, revealed within a tercet's heart, serves in the following tercet to enclose the rhyme that shall itself go echoing on. And Dante uses the rich hendecasyllable with absolute mastery, varying its accents with a free control, calling forth now gentleness, now majesty, now terror, now storm, now peace.

Dante, like Shakespeare, possesses in supreme degree the power of finality of phrase—the power, that is, by which the glowing concept so magnetizes, so draws to itself just the true words, and so assembles them within the rhythm, that they ring perfectly in memory. The *Divine Comedy* is full of such lines and groups of lines, a storehouse of quotations that have served for the enrichment of later literature and later life. Such are these:

Nessun maggior dolore  
che ricordarsi del tempo felice  
ne la miseria.

libertà va cercando, ch' è sì cara,  
come sa chi per lei vita rifiuta.

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Era già l'ora che volge il disio  
ai navicanti e 'ntenerisce il core  
lo dì c' han detto ai dolci amici addio;  
e che lo novo peregrin d'amore  
punge, se ode squilla di lontano  
che paia il giorno pianger che si more.

Tu proverai sì come sa di sale  
lo pane altrui, e come è duro calle  
lo scendere e 'l salir per l'altrui scale.

Rhythmic beauty and finality of phrase inhere in the *Commedia* and enhance its every element of life; but in translation, even in the best translation, they are lost, for, as Dante says:

Nothing that is harmonized by the bond of rhythm can be transferred from its own language to another without losing all its sweetness and harmony.

Great then though the values be that may remain in foreign paraphrase, they are much diminished by loss of the wondrous utterance that in the Italian gives them refinement and intensity.

Vividness Dante seeks by every device of rhetoric and of invention that he can

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wield: by interruption and surprise; by the studied rendering of gradual approach; by curious paraphrase; by cumulative varied repetition. But he seeks and wins vividness most of all by mastery in the presentation of sight and sound, and by felicity in metaphor and simile.

Dante possesses in supreme degree the power of visualization. He sees in his mind's eye the detailed form and shade of background, foreground, and personage throughout his journey. And he succeeds in conveying to the reader the very keenness of his own impression.

So he depicts the livid Acheron; the dark wild craggy walls of Hell; the fuming marsh of wrath; the fiery battlements of Dis, and the field of burning tombs within; the writhing trees of the grove of suicide; the iron plain of Malebolge, with its deep corrugations and its jagged transverse ridges; the perforated valley of the Simonists; the barrators' stream of seething pitch; the silent frozen sea of treachery. And as he comes from Hell to Purgatory how he

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revels in his wealth of new resource—light and color, sea and sky, meadow and forest glade! Now and again as they climb the steep slopes Dante and Virgil pause to look downward and away, and one follows in fancy the great prospect that meets their view; or as they move cautiously along the unguarded edge of a lofty terrace one is forced to consciousness of the tremendous precipice that lies below.

A typical instance of Dante's power in visual detail is his description of the steps at the gate of Purgatory: /

Thither we came to the first great stair; it was of white marble so polished and smooth that I mirrored myself in it as I appear. The second, of deeper hue than purple, was of a rough and scorched stone, cracked lengthwise and athwart. The third, which above lies massy, seemed to me of porphyry as flaming red as blood that spirts forth from a vein.

And here is the account of his entrance into the Earthly Paradise:

Fain now to search within and round about the divine forest dense and living, which tempered the new day to my eyes, I left the bank, taking the

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level ground very slowly, over the soil that everywhere breathes fragrance. A sweet breeze that had no variation in itself struck me on the brow, not with heavier blow than a soft wind; at which the branches, readily trembling, all of them were bending to the quarter where the holy mountain casts its first shadow; yet not so far parted from their straightness that the little birds among the tops would leave the practice of their every art; but with full joy singing they received the early breezes among the leaves, which kept a burden to their rhymes, such as gathers from bough to bough through the pine forest upon the shore of Chiassi, when Aeolus lets forth Scirocco. Now had my slow steps carried me within the ancient wood so far that I could not see back to where I had entered it: and lo, a stream took from me further progress, which toward the left with its little waves was bending the grass that sprang upon its bank. All the waters that are purest here on earth would seem to have some mixture in them, compared with that which hides nothing, although it moves along dusky under the perpetual shadow.

The same visual power gives terrible reality to the modes of punishment; and as applied to persons of the journey results in a series of sharply defined revealing

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portraits. A touch of description, a single gesture, and the man stands clear forever: Farinata, towering from his burning tomb "as if he held this Hell in high despite"; the princely Manfred—

biondo era e bello e di gentile aspetto—;

Forese, peering from his sunken eyes.

In the *Paradise* the same power, limited in range, differentiates the luminousness of the several planets through which Dante and Beatrice ascend—a luminousness now pearly, now silver, now golden, now ruddy, now white—and then expands again in the portrayal of the great rose-like amphitheatre reaching up from an arena of light as the hills rise from the waters of an Italian lake.

Portraiture in the *Paradise* is deliberately sacrificed. The facial lineaments, still faintly seen in the two lowest heavens, are thereafter hidden in radiance, and Dante's task becomes the sheer portrayal of light flashing upon light. Yet in the intensity of this one unsubstantial medium



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he achieves the greatest triumphs of his visual imagery.

So within the ruddy glow of Mars a host of spirits, each a centre of living light, assumes before the traveler's uplifted eyes the semblance of a great cross:

As the mysterious Milky Way shines in the skies with its lesser and its greater lights, so within the star the radiances grouped themselves in constellation, forming the venerable sign of the cross. And here my memory overwhelms my speech, for that cross flashed forth Christ, so that I can find no worthy expression for it. But he who takes up his own cross and follows Christ will yet forgive me for this silence, when for himself he shall behold Christ gleaming thus. From arm to arm of the great cross, and from head to foot, lights were moving, brightly scintillating as they met together and in their passing by, putting me in mind of a beam of sunshine in a dark room on earth, and of the motes that gleam as they move through it. And as a viol or harp, strung in accord of many strings, may render an impression of sweet harmony to one who does not yet make out the melody, thus, from the lights which there appeared to me, a melody was gathered through the cross which filled me with love ere I could understand the words.

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As the poem is supremely real in sight, so, too, it echoes with reality of sound, from the abyss of Hell, with the gathered thunder of its infinite woe, to the hymns of Purgatory, to the great choral unison of Paradise. In Limbus there is no plaint save that of sighing; below, the voices wail and shriek amid the snarling of the infernal guardians. Nor was ever the drama of succeeding cry and silence more mightily vivid than in the narrative of Ugolino. And as the cantos pass we hear the howling of beasts; the whirlwind's roar; the rushing forest chase; the plunging cataract; the horn of Nimrod, echoed in Roncesvaux; the distant evening bell; the organ tones of the bronze gates of Peter; music of voice and instrument; the song of birds; the murmur of a mountain stream that descends clear from rock to rock:

un mormorar di fiume  
che scende chiaro giù di pietra in pietra.

By virtue of his profound sense of the interrelations of life Dante is supreme in

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metaphor and simile. Whether in description, narrative, or discourse, he could draw from his universal consciousness of nature and of man just the borrowed word, just the sound, just the scene to reveal the desired act or thought or image. So in uncertainty he says that "yes and no are jousting" in his head; so he speaks of "the bitter steps of flight"; so, looking down from Gemini, he calls this earth "the little threshing-floor we grow so fierce about."

Cheer after doubt recalls to him a morning picture:

As flowerets, bent and closed by the chill of night, after the sun shines on them straighten themselves all open on their stem, so I recovered from disheartenment.

The surprise of certain spirits at a sight strange to them reminds him of the mountaineer

when rustic and uncouth he comes to town, moves in a maze of wonder, and as he looks is wordless.

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A group of the blessed sing and cease  
like the lark that first soars through the air in  
song, and then is still, content with the lingering  
sweetness of her own melody—

Quale allodetta che 'n aere si spazia  
prima cantando, e poi tace contenta  
de l'ultima dolcezza che la sazia.

The *Comedy*, divine though it be called,  
is none the less a human comedy; for it is  
supreme in revelation of the human soul.  
The spirits of the other world are indi-  
vidual still in heart and mind, bear with  
them still the memory of individual experi-  
ence. So, in the Hell, Paolo and Francesca,  
of gentle heart, though stained with the  
one sin, endure again the sweet thoughts  
and the desire that brought them to their  
fate; paternal love, stronger than death,  
sways Cavalcante as he seeks his son, and  
gives eternal poignancy to the gnawing  
vengeance of Ugolino; partisan bitterness  
and loyal city faith conflict forever in  
Farinata's pride; Ulysses, eager for end-  
less exploration, sails on beyond the strait  
into the unknown.

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Many a brief narrative holds compressed a full romance. Pia de' Tolomei tells her story in three lines:

“Siena saw my youth; Maremma saw death come to me; and that he knows who once had ringed me in betrothal with his gem”—

“Siena mi fè; disfecemi Maremma;  
salsi colui che 'nnanellata pria  
disposando m'avea con la sua gemma.”

But the human interest of the *Comedy* centres in the experience of its hero as he sustains the warfare of the journey and the emotion of its many meetings, periled in the descent of Hell, toiling up the steeps of Purgatory unto his lady, ascending then to the attainment of God's very presence.

[ Deeply human is his relation to Virgil, no mere allegorical guide, but (a wise, patient, and resourceful friend,) so loved that when, his part fulfilled, he vanishes from the Earthly Paradise, not even the wonders of the divine forest and of the pageant, not even the coming of Beatrice, can stay the tears. ]

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More deeply human still is his relation to Beatrice. She also is no mere symbol, but the very woman whom Dante had loved on earth so reverently. It is Beatrice who from her seat in heaven descends to Virgil and bids him go to the aid of Dante. Throughout the journey it is with hope of seeing Beatrice that Virgil encourages the weary traveler. And at last, in the Earthly Paradise, she appears to him:

I have seen ere now at the beginning of the day the eastern region all rosy, while the rest of heaven was beautiful with fair, clear sky; and the face of the sun rise shaded, so that through the tempering of vapors the eye sustained it a long while. Thus within a cloud of flowers, which from the hands of the angels was ascending and falling down again, a lady, with olive wreath above a white veil, appeared to me, robed with the color of living flame beneath a green mantle. And my spirit that now for so long a time had not been broken down trembling in amazement at her presence, without having more knowledge by the eyes, through occult virtue that proceeded from her, felt the great potency of ancient love.

And then the drama moves in a way unforeseen. For in his utter honesty

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Dante cannot feign that the words she has for him hold greeting; they hold instead a reproof unspeakably bitter to him, though it be moved by love—a reproof for his faithlessness, after her death, to the high ideal toward which, in life, her eyes had led him. Only after probing indictment and full confession from a heart wrung with remorse does she grant him welcome. They rise then, in dear companionship, to the Empyrean. There she leaves him, St. Bernard taking her place, while Dante is gazing about the great amphitheatre. He turns to question her, and finds that she is gone:

My glance had now comprehended the general form of Paradise, but had not yet fixed itself upon one part, and I turned with kindled will to ask my lady concerning things whereof I desired explanation. But though I thought to ask of her, another answered me: I thought to see Beatrice, and beheld an aged man dressed as were all the glorious. In his eyes and on his countenance was diffused a benign joy like that  
V of a loving father. And I said straightway: “Where is she?” And he replied: “Beatrice

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desired me to come from my place to effect the completion of thy desire, and if thou lift thine eyes to the third circle of the highest part thou wilt see her there in the throne to which her merit destined her.”

Dante then, to Beatrice:

“O lady in whom my hope is strong, who didst deign for my sake to leave print of thy feet in Hell, for the grace and the virtue that have enabled me to behold what I have beheld I thank thy power and thy goodness. Thou hast drawn me from slavery to freedom; do thou remain my generous guardian, so that my soul, to which thou hast given health, may find favor in thy sight when it shall leave my body.” Thus I prayed, and she, so far away, smiled and looked at me, then turned her eyes to the eternal fountain.

↳ Nobly human is Dante's attainment of the vision of God. Toward this, the purpose of the whole journey, the poem sweeps in climax through the Paradise. With each heaven Dante grows more capable of sustaining the intense light. Finally, his eyes bathed in the sea of the Empyrean, St. Bernard bids him look upward toward the Point which is the Divine



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Presence. But achievement demands more than an upward look; for penetration of the intense descending radiance can be but the gradual gain of resolute will. Steadily he holds to the great endeavor, straining upward and upward, until at last his sight attains the very Point itself, attains a supreme consciousness of power, wisdom, love. Keenly intellectual still, he gazes, wondering at the twofold nature; human and divine, of the God-radiance, until there comes a flash of ultimate revelation in which all wonder is satisfied. Then, utter peace

but now there turned my desire and my will,  
like a wheel in even revolution, that Love that  
moves the sun and the other stars—

ma già volgeva il mio disio e il velle,  
sì come rota ch'igualmente è mossa,  
l'amor che move il sole e l'altre stelle.

The poetic energy of the *Divine Comedy* dies not, but remains a living and abounding source for the continual enhancement of intellect and of emotion. Not only does the mighty experience of the poem

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itself stir the deeps of mind and heart; but it empowers heart and mind to discern and to receive more fully than before the poetic energy inherent in all life.

From the controlling purposefulness of the *Comedy* comes an invigorating resolution; from its universality, an enlargement of consciousness in time and space; from its varied unity, an increased delight in coherent design; from the beauty of its verse, the gift of deeper rhythmic pleasure; from its finality in expression, a new sense of the values of word and phrase. So, too, the poem brings a new keenness of vision, a new alertness in the world of sound, a readier perception of revealing similarity; so, too, it enables a man to share with fuller knowledge and fuller sympathy in all the abounding life of the human spirit.)

The *Divine Comedy* conveys the message of an apostle rapt to exaltation by the noblest of all themes; and it conveys that message in the power of a poetry worthy of such apostleship.



NOTE



## NOTE

The quotations in Italian and in Latin are from *Le opere di Dante, testo critico della Società Dantesca Italiana* (Florence, Bemporad, 1921). The English quotations from the *Commedia* are taken from Norton's version, those from the *Vita nuova* from Rossetti's, those from the *Convivio* from Jackson's, and those from the other works from *A Translation of the Latin Works of Dante Alighieri* in the Temple Classics Series. In several cases I have modified the translation.

The quotations on the pages of this book indicated by the figures in the first column below are from the passages in the works of Dante indicated in the second column. The numbering followed in the second column is that of the edition of the *Opere* referred to above.

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7-8.....	<i>Vita nuova</i> XXI, 2-4
11-12.....	<i>Vita nuova</i> XVIII, 1-6
26.....	<i>Epistola</i> XIII, 39
27.....	<i>Monarchia</i> I, iv, 2
28.....	<i>Convivio</i> I, i, 1
28-29.....	<i>Convivio</i> I, i, 4
30-31.....	<i>Convivio</i> II, xii, 9
31.....	<i>Convivio</i> II, xv, 3
31.....	<i>Inferno</i> XXVI, 119-20

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71.....	<i>Purgatorio</i> IX, 94-102
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74.....	<i>Paradiso</i> XIV, 97-123
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## Note

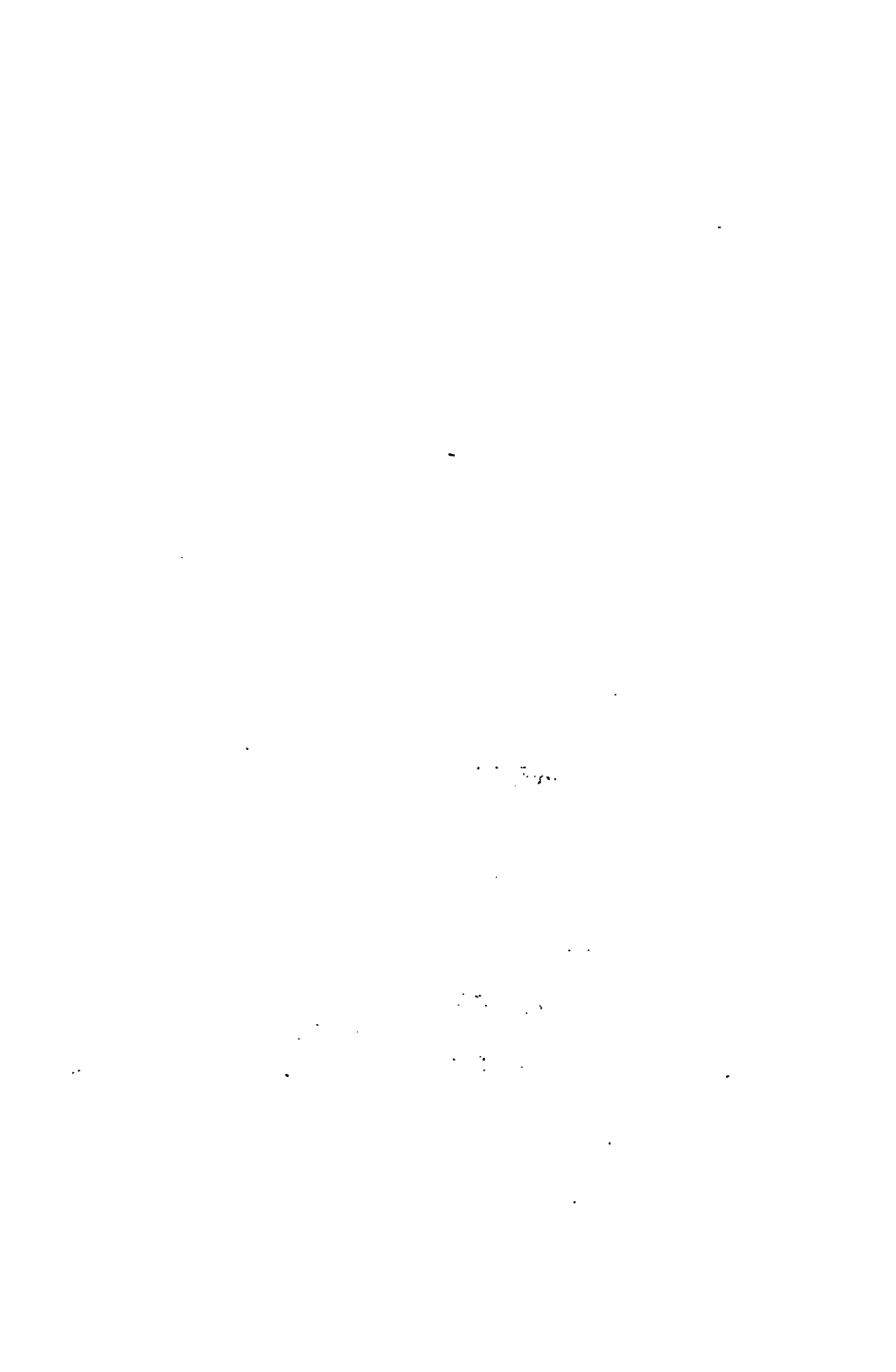
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